Beyond Conferences: Attitudes of High School Administrators Toward Parental Involvement in One Small Midwestern State

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Abstract

The importance of parental involvement for students of all ages has been documented by researchers and acknowledged by practitioners. Although many earlier studies have contended that there is a positive association between parental involvement and school performance at the middle and high school levels, administrators in the field are aware that parental involvement levels decline as a child progresses through school, and that there are many challenges associated with implementing parental involvement strategies at the secondary level. This study assessed the attitudes of South Dakota high school principals regarding parental involvement in four categories including communication, competency, collaboration issues, and external factors. Analysis of the data revealed that while principals may agree that parental involvement is critical at the secondary level, implementation of appropriate and meaningful roles for parents is challenging. The most significant differences in principals' attitudes were found within the complex category of communication. Other slight attitudinal differences were found in the responses of principals to statements related to external factors which may inhibit secondary level parental involvement. The attitude of the principal cannot be understated when it comes to establishing a schoolwide parent involvement program. Thus, many principals would be well served to assess their own attitudes toward this sometimes overlooked aspect of educational partnerships.

Key Words: high schools, administrators, principals, parental involvement, parents, conferences, communication, programs, competency, collaboration, external factors, partnerships, roles, attitudes, perspectives, South Dakota

Introduction and Purpose of Study

The terms for parental involvement are as varied as the definitions. Some theorists and practitioners refer to *home–school partnerships*; some prefer to call it *parental participation*, some *parents as partners*. Whatever the terminology, the issue of parental involvement in schools has become an increasingly popular topic, both conversationally among professional educators and legislatively among politicians in charge of school funding (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004; Fan, 2001; Fege, 2000; Teicher, 2007). Moreover, some reference to parental involvement is addressed in most legislation concerning K–12 education. As a result of such legislation, researchers recognize that parents and principals alike have a tremendous opportunity to build partnerships and work together (Igo, 2002). Epstein (2007) maintained that nearly all educators recognize that successful students, regardless of ability level, have "families who stay informed and involved in their children's education" (p. 16). Indeed, parental involvement may be one of the few things in education about which there seems to be universal agreement (Nichols-Solomon, 2001).

Although varied in name and definition, the importance of parent involvement has been documented by numerous researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. The need for involvement extends beyond elementary school, and sustained levels of parental involvement have been shown to have a positive effect on student grades, attendance, attitude, and motivation (Deslandes, Royer, Turcotte, & Bertrand, 1997; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Wheeler (1992) noted that "parent involvement at the middle and secondary school levels is vital if teenagers are to become stable and productive adults" (p. 28). Research indicates that when parents participate in their children's education, an increase in student achievement and an improvement of students' attitudes are typical outcomes. Increased attendance, fewer discipline problems, and higher aspirations have been correlated with an increase in parent involvement (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Moreover, a positive association between parental support and school grades has been established (Deslandes et al., 1997); Deslandes and colleagues also found "empirical evidence that parents retain substantial influence over their adolescents' school performance" (p. 202).

In a recent review, Kreider and colleagues (2007) analyzed studies linking types of family involvement to both middle and high school students' social and academic outcomes. They identified three family involvement processes

including parenting, home–school relationships, and responsibility for learning outcomes. These processes can all be linked with higher grades and test scores, higher self-esteem, reduced substance abuse, and desire for further education (Shumow, 2009).

Unfortunately, parental involvement has become a phrase oft mentioned but subsequently ignored, especially at the high school level. Leon (2003) believed that like a buzzword, we trust that just repeating the term will effect some benefit. Unfortunately, contemporary research has shown that parental involvement actually declines as students grow older; by the time a child reaches secondary school few parents remain active in the educational process (Spera, 2005; Stouffer, as cited in Lebahn, 1995). "In comparison to the wealth of attention that has been focused on involving parents with schools during the early childhood and elementary school years, less attention has been directed to parents of high school students" (Shumow, 2009, p. 2).

The decline in parental involvement may occur for a variety of reasons, including the structure of the high school, the sheer number of students that teachers are responsible for at the secondary level, and the increased difficulty level of a secondary curriculum (Shumow, 2009). However, research has demonstrated that continued participation by parents throughout high school remains in the best interest of the child (Connors & Epstein, as cited in Phelps, 1999; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Simon, 2001).

The purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes toward parental involvement of high school principals and assistant principals in the state of South Dakota and to identify potential challenges to parental involvement from the perspective of the school administrator. This study also sought to determine if attitudinal differences exist based on principals' gender, professional title, years of experience, educational attainment, size and type of school, and percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch.

Literature Review

Leon (2003) aptly noted that the mere scarcity of research done on parent involvement at the secondary level is a noteworthy "clue" that such involvement occurs much less frequently than it does at the elementary level. Even so, parental involvement in a child's school life, which usually constitutes his or her main social world, continues to be important during the secondary years. The attitudes and habits that a student forms during these years of adolescence have a significant impact on his or her success in later life, thereby making it important that "parents or guardians continue to play a significant role in a student's life, both in and out of school" (Leon, 2003, p. 32).

Flaxman and Inger maintained that the "benefits of parent involvement are not confined to early childhood or the elementary grades. There are strong positive effects for involving parents continuously through high school" (1991, p. 5). Such efforts work to not only increase opportunities for academic success but also to assuage the natural turbulence caused by adolescence. Parental involvement at the middle and secondary levels is often a difficult balance between adolescents' developing independence and their parents' quest to nurture (McGrew-Zoubi, 1998).

The benefits of continued parental involvement during the high school years are not confined to the development of sound work habits and parental role modeling. Sustained research over the past 20 years has consistently shown that secondary-level parental involvement has a positive impact on both grades and attendance, and is negatively correlated with student dropout rates. Deslandes et al. (1997) noted "significant positive relationships between family discussions about school, grades, and the future and school achievement" (p. 200). Studying 525 Canadian secondary students, their results indicated three factors that contributed to school achievement: parental acceptance, supervision, and psychological autonomy granting. The above study defined parental involvement as presence at school, communicating with the teachers, or helping at home with homework. The authors noted "modest, yet positive correlations" between parenting style and parental involvement levels in school and cite several earlier studies that indicate "students with higher grades come from parents who demonstrate high levels of warmth, supervision, and psychological autonomy granting and who are highly involved in their adolescent's schooling" (Lamborn et al., 1993 & Steinberg et al., 1992 as cited in Deslandes et al., 1997, pp. 192-193). These results reinforce those obtained by Dornbusch and Ritter (1988) in which a positive relationship between student grades and parental attendance at student activities was identified.

Chronic absenteeism can be reduced with effective communication strategies and a commitment from the school to partner with parents to improve attendance rates. Sheldon and Epstein (2005) found that schools implementing diverse partnership strategies focused on improving communication regarding student attendance allowed parents to more effectively monitor and supervise their teenager.

While it is generally accepted that parental involvement is necessary to maintain a quality educational system, there exist a number of reasons why parental involvement may decrease at the middle and secondary levels. One such factor appears to be related to the age of the child. Parental participation in school activities drops significantly from elementary to middle school and continues to decline as the child progresses through school (Brough & Irvin,

2001; Eccles & Harold, 1993). In general, parents of elementary school students are more active in school-related activities than parents of older students. In 2003, *Principal* reported that greater than 90% of parents with students in grades kindergarten to fifth grade attended a scheduled parent–teacher conference, while only 59% of ninth and tenth grade parents attended ("Trends in Educational Statistics," pp. 54-55).

Hollifield (1994) suggested that the adolescent student has an increased desire for autonomy and greater individual responsibility. Parents who are aware of this need for independence may distance themselves from their teen, including their school life. As Shinn (2002) stated, "Parents, recognizing that adolescents need to assert their independence, tend to back away from their child too soon" (p. 34).

McGrew-Zoubi (1998) spoke of the "delicate balance" that exists when parents try to remain actively involved in their teen's education while at the same time affording their child the opportunity to experience greater freedom and responsibilities. However, other research contends that "parent involvement at the middle and secondary school levels is vital if teenagers are to become stable and productive adults" (Wheeler, 1992, p. 28), noting that adolescence is the time when most teens are forming lifetime values, making continued parental involvement in both home life and school life especially critical. Studying the attitudes toward parental involvement among selected secondary-level principals, teachers, and parents, Atha noted that "it appears that parents choose not to visit their teenager's classroom in high school because many do not feel welcome at school, many do not have or take the time to visit, and many feel that their teenagers would be embarrassed if they attended their classes" (1998, p. 157).

A communication problem often exists between parents and teachers resulting in a decline in parental involvement as children progress through the educational system. "Many teachers feel that parents are not willing to become involved in their children's education, and many parents are not aware of opportunities for involvement" (Halsey, 2005, p. 58). Observations of a junior high school in Texas revealed that while teachers felt they maintained an "open door policy" with respect to parental involvement, parental perception was quite different, and traditional school communication efforts relied heavily on those which could be best defined as institutional in nature. As explained by Epstein (1987), institutional interactions refer to those that involve all families such as parent–teacher associations, open houses, newsletters, or general invitations to a school play or activity, whereas individual interactions between a parent and teacher involve a specific student. The majority of the teachers at the junior high school used institutional methods of communication,

which were perceived by parents as announcements or notifications, not as true invitations or requests for parental participation. Moreover, Halsey found that teachers believed that parents were not interested in participating in their children's education, given their lackluster response to the institutional communication methods. However, parents felt that because they did not receive personal, individual invitations, their presence was not truly desired. The failure of communication efforts at the junior high became a "deterrent for parent involvement. Once such failure occurred, efforts on both sides decreased, and the connection between the groups was minimal" (Halsey, 2005, p. 64).

A 1999 national poll conducted for the Public Education Network indicated parents often "feel excluded from, or without a role, in their local school" (Fege, 2000, p. 42). While 47% of those parents polled admitted that time was a barrier to their school participation, even more (48%) felt that they were never given the opportunity to become involved or did not know how to initiate such involvement (Fege, 2000). These numbers demonstrate a clear lack of communication between parents and schools.

The principal's attitude toward parental involvement may be the key determinant of the extent of involvement parents have in school programs (Peiffer, 2003; Lebahn, 1995). Even though many principals view parental involvement as desirable and necessary for a successful school climate, many do not actively support substantive parent involvement programs, and the subsequent levels of parental involvement in a given school may be the result of the attitude of the principal toward the concept (Lacey, 2000). Established educational practices may even serve as barriers to effective parental involvement. "Administrative practices frequently serve to defeat and discourage parental involvement, although not intentionally" (Peiffer, 2003, p. 12). Principals play a crucial role in establishing parental involvement; however, sometimes they are not willing to take the necessary steps to promote parental involvement in their individual schools (Peiffer, 2003). "Generally, high school principals indicated that their schools view parents as important partners with lukewarm enthusiasm in comparison to their enthusiastic elementary counterparts" (Osborne & deOnis, 1997, p. 21).

Challenges related to parental involvement definitions and strategies for implementation are further compounded when one considers the inherent developmental differences between students at elementary, middle, and secondary schools. Elementary schools often have more concrete, defined roles for parents, both in and out of school (Brough & Irvin, 2001). As the student progresses into middle and high school, the parent role becomes less defined and ultimately more challenging for parents to navigate. The mental picture of what constitutes successful levels of parental involvement at the elementary

level is not necessarily appropriate for secondary schools, and merely implementing the same parental involvement strategies at the high school level will most likely be met with failure. Definitions and implementation responsibilities are typically left to the building-level school administrator who frequently has not received formal training in building home–school partnerships as part of their graduate coursework. This factor compounds the underlying challenges of creating a developmentally appropriate parental involvement program at the high school level. Since the responsibility for implementation of parental involvement strategies typically falls to the building-level administrator, it is imperative the secondary-level principal be cognizant of his or her personal attitudes as they relate to the issue.

Methodology

Prior to research design, a literature review was undertaken which specifically related to studies which addressed parental involvement efforts that focused on the middle and secondary grade levels. The population for this study consisted of all individuals identified as active secondary school administrators in the state of South Dakota via information received from the *South Dakota Department of Education Directory* and confirmed by individual school websites; 245 secondary school administrators were identified for the 2007-2008 academic year. Given the relatively small population, all secondary-level administrators were surveyed, including those identified as principals and assistant or vice principals. Data were collected from public school principals and private school principals, as well as principals working in alternative and tribal schools, using "The Parent Involvement Survey for Secondary School Principals." This instrument was modified by the researcher from the Parent Involvement Inventory originally designed by Brittle (1994) for elementary principals and subsequently replicated with secondary school principals in Michigan by Peiffer in 2003. Due to the changing nature of parental involvement as a child progresses through school, the current researcher (lead author) felt modifications were necessary in order to specifically address issues relevant to parental involvement at the secondary level. As a result, some questions were altered, several were omitted, and others added to specifically deal with issues prevalent at the secondary level.

The survey was comprised of two parts. Part I presented 32 statements designed to quantitatively assess the attitudes of principals toward parent involvement as well as one qualitative open-ended question. The first 32 statements within Part I collected information related to four researcher-identified categories: communication concerns, competency issues, collaboration issues,

and external factors. For the purposes of this study communication concerns were defined as issues related to both the formal and informal methods of communication between the school and the parent(s). Competency issues were those attributed to human nature such as the fear of failure on the part of the parent and/or fear of criticism on the part of the educator. Collaboration issues involved how principals viewed the role of the parents in a secondary school, especially with respect to decision and policymaking. External factors were defined as those beyond the control of the administrator or parent, such as parental lack of time to volunteer as well as autonomy issues typically associated with adolescent development. Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they believed a statement to be true using a four-point semantic differential scale with 1 = strong disagreement, 2 = disagreement, 3 = agreement, and 4 = strong agreement. The researcher intentionally chose a four-point scale given that the survey is relatively innocuous and was not likely to stimulate complex, emotional responses. Mangione (1995) stated that if given a choice, many respondents will choose the middle. By eliminating the natural middle point, respondents were forced to make a definitive, reflective choice. The final question provided an opportunity for principals to share innovative or successful strategies that they had utilized to generate secondary level parental involvement. The proposed independent variables of the study were formulated from data in Part II, which consisted of seven demographic questions related to the administrator and their school.

Prior to data collection, a draft of the survey instrument was critically reviewed by six professionals including two college faculty members, two school superintendents, and two former educators no longer employed in the education field. All members of the critique panel were former secondary school principals, but were not currently part of the population pool. Critique panel members provided written comments and suggestions regarding the survey, and adjustments were made and incorporated into the final draft of the survey instrument. At the recommendation of the critique panel, two statements were excluded to eliminate possible redundancy, and two statements were reworded for clarity.

Prenotification postcards were sent to all secondary school principals in South Dakota one week prior to the mailing of the survey instrument. Survey instruments with an accompanying cover letter were sent in mid-September 2007, and a second set of postcards, these offering appreciation for completed surveys and serving as a reminder to those who had not yet returned the survey, were mailed two weeks later.

Data Analysis

Three research questions guided the study:

1. How strongly did South Dakota secondary school principals believe in parental involvement? Means and standard deviations were created for each individual item response based on the four-point Likert scale.

2. What was the relative concern regarding secondary principals' attitudes as they related to the following four identified survey areas: communication concerns, competency issues, collaboration issues, and external factors?

3. What differences in principals' attitudes, if any, were based on demographic characteristics?

Demographic data were reported as frequencies and percentages to provide a general representation of the respondents. Demographic data were grouped for statistical purposes. Professional title was grouped as either Principal or Assistant/Vice Principal. Number of years of experience was grouped 0-5, 6-11, 12-19, and 20/+. Educational attainment was grouped into four categories: masters, educational specialist, doctoral degrees, or other. These groups were later reduced to two groups entitled masters and post-masters for analysis purposes. The type of school was noted as public, private, or other. The category "other," which included those schools identified as South Dakota tribal or Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) secondary schools as well as alternative schools, was eliminated from statistical analyses due to lack of responses.

The principals' attitudes toward each category (communication concerns, competency issues, collaboration issues, and external factors) were then compared based on the demographic categories (years of experience, size of school, and percent of students receiving free or reduced lunch) using one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs). Comparisons in the areas of gender, professional title, educational attainment, and type of school were made using t tests for independent means. For each statistical test, the principals' demographic grouping served as the independent variable, and the composite mean for each response category served as the dependent variable. All significant ANOVAs were followed by Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) test to identify which groups differed significantly from the others. A .05 level of significance was used for all inferential statistics. Of the 245 administrators who received the survey, 156 surveys were completed and returned, resulting in an overall response rate of 63.7%.

Demographic Data

Data were obtained regarding seven demographic characteristics. Four characteristics related to personal and profession demographics of the administrator

(gender, professional title, educational attainment, and years of experience), and three related to the school in which the administrator was employed (type of school, size of school, and the approximate percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch). Not all percentages sum to 100.0 due to rounding. Additionally, not all independent variables included 156 responses due to elective omission or invalid responses. Percentages were based on the number of valid respondents for each independent variable. Table 1 provides a detailed description of demographic data.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent		Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Gender				*Type of School*		
Male	127	84.1		Public	131	84.0
Female	24	15.9		Private	18	11.5
Omission	5	--		Other	7	4.5
Years of Experience				*School Size*		
0-5	55	35.5		0-100	57	36.8
6-11	42	27.1		101-300	53	34.2
12-19	33	21.3		301+	45	29.0
20/+	25	16.1		Omission	1	--
Omission	1	--				
Professional Title				*% of Students Qualifying for Free and Reduced Lunch*		
Principal	125	80.6				
Asst/Vice	21	13.5		0-25	49	34.8
Other	9	5.8		26-50	67	47.5
Omission	1	--		51-100	25	17.7
				Omission	15	--
Educational Attainment						
Masters	94	61.4				
Specialist	52	34.0				
Doctorate	7	4.6				
Other	3	--				

Data summarized in Table 1 indicate that most respondents identified themselves as principals, were male, and worked in public schools. Additionally, more than two-thirds of the respondents held administrative positions in schools serving less than 301 students, and many worked in schools where a high percentage of students qualified for free or reduced lunch status. Over one-third of the principals responding had five or less years of experience, and the vast majority held either a masters or specialist degree.

Instrument Reliability

The computed reliability coefficient (Cronbach Alpha) for the survey instrument was 0.692, indicating that the instrument was moderately reliable. Additionally, reliabilities computed for each subscale produced the following coefficients: Collaboration = 0.612, External Factors = 0.590, Communication = 0.449, and Competency = -0.015.

Results

One objective of the study was to determine how strongly South Dakota secondary level principals believed in the concept of parental involvement. Means and standard deviations were computed for each individual item response based on the four-point Likert scale. As noted in Table 2, "Creating a partnership between the school and parent(s) has a positive impact on student grades" (M = 3.64) and "Creating a partnership between the school and parent(s) has a positive impact on student behavior" (M = 3.55) represented the strongest beliefs among responding principals. Both statements related to collaboration issues. Additionally, the very low standard deviations associated with these two responses (.507 and .570, respectively) indicate a high degree of consensus among principals regarding these beliefs. Likewise, principals tended to agree that "The school should develop creative ways to overcome barriers when parents do not participate in school events, such as parent–teacher conferences" (M = 3.44).

Survey statements showing the lowest level of agreement also included two collaboration statements. Respondents did not feel that "Parent input in the evaluation of teachers is useful" (M = 2.17), nor that "Parents should participate in staff hiring decisions" (M = 1.73). However, the high standard deviations associated with these items (.812 and .741, respectively) is indicative of less consensus among the respondents. "The primary responsibility to increase parental involvement within a high school lies with classroom teachers" was categorized as a communication concern between the high school and adolescent parents. Principals demonstrated a general tendency to disagree with this statement (M = 2.20).

Table 2. Strength of Principals' Beliefs in Parent Involvement

Principals' Beliefs	N	M	SD
1. Creating a partnership between the school and parent(s) has a positive impact on student grades.	156	3.64	.507
2. Creating a partnership between the school and parent(s) has a positive impact on student behavior.	156	3.55	.570
3. The school should develop creative ways to overcome barriers when parents do not participate in school events	156	3.44	.655
4. The primary responsibility to increase parental involvement within a high school lies with classroom teachers.	154	2.20	.582
5. Parental input in the evaluation of teachers is useful.	156	2.17	.812
6. Parents should participate in staff hiring decisions.	156	1.73	.741

Research question two sought to identify whether principals' attitudes differed with respect to the four categories in which the survey statements were grouped (communication, competency, collaboration, or external factors). Although a wide range of individual agreement toward each category was evident, descriptive analysis failed to identify any significant differences when comparing group responses for survey items within the four identified categories. As noted previously, communication concerns included issues related to the methods of communication between the school and the parent(s), while competency issues were factors attributed to human nature such as the fear of failure on the part of the parent or fear of criticism on the part of the educator. Collaboration issues involved how principals viewed the parental role in school, and external factors were defined as those beyond the control of the administrator or parent, such as a lack of time to volunteer.

Table 3. Relative Concern Among Principals

Category	N	M	SD
Communication	151	2.66	.289
Competency	151	2.54	.283
Collaboration	154	2.68	.320
External Factors	153	2.76	.361

Research question three sought to identify differing respondent attitudes toward parental involvement based on the independent variables including teh administrator's professional title, educational attainment, years of experience, and gender, and the type or size of the school and percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch. Results found that there were no significant differences in attitudes of South Dakota principals with regard to collaboration and competency based on any of the respondents' characteristics. However, differences were noted in attitudes toward communication based on gender, educational attainment, and professional title, as well as the size of school in which the principal was employed.

As depicted in Table 4, male administrators tended to show a higher degree of agreement toward statements related to communication issues than did female administrators. As noted, the category communication includes issues related to both formal and informal methods of communication between the school and the parent, such as "Our school does a sufficient job of encouraging parental involvement," and "The primary responsibility for increasing parental involvement at the secondary level lies with the building administrator."

Table 4. Differences in Principals' Attitudes Based on Gender

Category	Gender	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Competency	Male	123	2.54	.299	.113	144	.910
	Female	23	2.53	.217			
Collaboration	Male	126	2.66	.340	-1.952	147	.057
	Female	23	2.77	.206			
External Factors	Male	124	2.77	.382	.911	146	.364
	Female	24	2.70	.258			
Communication	Male	125	2.68	.282	3.088	145	.002*
	Female	22	2.48	.285			

*Significant difference at .05.

Another difference was found when comparing responses based on levels of educational achievement. Administrators in the post-master's group tended to respond more positively to statements related to communication than did those in the master's group, $M = 2.72$ and $M = 2.61$, respectively, t (145) = 2.335, $p = .021$.

Table 5. Differences in Principals' Attitudes Based on Educational Attainment

Category	Type	N	M	SD	t	df	p
Competency	Masters	91	2.52	.237	-0.776	145	.440
	Post-Masters	56	2.56	.343			
Collaboration	Masters	92	2.65	.329	-1.177	148	.241
	Post-Masters	58	2.71	.306			
External Factors	Masters	91	2.72	.374	-1.530	147	.128
	Post-Masters	58	2.81	.344			
Communication	Masters	89	2.61	.287	-2.335	145	.021*
	Post-Masters	58	2.72	.275			

* Significant difference at .05.

Likewise, respondents who self-identified themselves as principals indicated a higher level of agreement (M = 2.70) with statements related to communication than did those who claimed titles of assistant or vice principal (M = 2.49).

Table 6. Differences in Principals' Attitudes Based on Professional Title

Category	Type	N	M	SD	t	df	p
Competency	Principal	121	2.54	.297	0.035	139	.972
	Asst./Vice	20	2.53	.244			
Collaboration	Principal	123	2.67	.318	-1.143	142	.255
	Asst./Vice	21	2.75	.266			
External Factors	Principal	122	2.79	.347	1.524	141	.130
	Asst./Vice	21	2.66	.351			
Communication	Principal	120	2.70	.280	3.049	139	.003*
	Asst./Vice	21	2.49	.283			

* Significant difference at .05.

Another significant difference was noted in the category of communication among principals of smaller (0-300) and larger (301/+) schools. Generally, those principals employed at larger (in South Dakota this was identified as high schools with 301+ students) were less likely to show agreement with survey statements related to parental communication compared to principals in smaller schools.

Table 7. Differences in Principals' Attitudes Based on School Size

Category	Response Means			F	p
	0-100	101-300	300+		
Competency	2.52	2.56	2.52	0.324	.723
Collaboration	2.66	2.67	2.71	0.368	.693
External Factors	2.71	2.83	2.72	1.815	.166
Communication	2.69	2.73	2.52	6.896	.001*

* Significant difference at .05.

Although most of the respondents surveyed were employed at public schools, principals of private schools indicated less agreement toward statements in the category dealing with external factors. Generally, compared to their public school counterparts, private school principals consider external factors to be less of a barrier to parental involvement in secondary schools. One respondent indicated that there is a greater expectation for parental involvement at private schools, and principals are less inclined to view external factors as a viable justification for lack of involvement.

Table 8. Differences in Principals' Attitudes Based on School Type

Category	Type	N	M	SD	t	df	p
Competency	Public	128	2.54	.237	0.128	142	.898
	Private	16	2.53	.343			
Collaboration	Public	129	2.66	.329	-1.056	145	.293
	Private	18	2.75	.306			
External Factors	Public	130	2.78	.374	3.005	147	.003*
	Private	16	2.50	.344			
Communication	Public	127	2.66	.287	-0.394	142	.694
	Private	17	2.69	.275			

* Significant difference at .05.

Finally, one-way ANOVAs were also used for comparisons based upon student body eligibility for free and reduced lunch. This is a typical format for identifying the socioeconomic status of a community or school. The ANOVAs were conducted using the following groups of free and reduced lunch status: 0- 25%, 26-50%, and over 50%. No significant differences were found to suggest differences in principals' attitudes based on the socioeconomic status of

the student body. Likewise, no significant differences were noted based upon the principal's years of experience.

Part I of the survey also included one open-ended qualitative question in which principals were asked to offer input regarding innovative or successful strategies that they had used to generate secondary-level parental involvement. Less than one-third of the respondents offered comments regarding their experiences or best practices, and most comments related to methods of collaboration or communication. However, numerous comments were received regarding the importance of personalized invitations to parent–teacher conferences in the form of phone calls. One principal stated, "Our administrative assistants called each secondary student household the week of conferences. We had a tremendous turnout of parents." Another wrote, "Phones in every classroom; teachers contact parents during their prep periods, and we use automated calling to remind parents of activities such as conferences." Principals also stressed the need to utilize multiple methods to communicate with parents including web-based parent portals, school websites, traditional newsletters, local newspaper columns, and email.

A number of respondents indicated that they used incentives to increase parental attendance at their school events, including gas card giveaways, student bonus points, and food. "Feed them and they will come! (We offer) breakfast with the teachers and dinner meetings." Another penned, "Serving food has increased our parent/community involvement at parent–teacher conferences and our open houses."

Several respondents discussed avenues related to collaboration such as advisory councils, booster clubs, and parental input into the school budget process. Although the names differed, respondents wrote of parent advisory groups, committees, or boards which met monthly or quarterly. One principal described this format as a "way for parents to bounce ideas off of school people and the school to bounce ideas off parents." Several principals included the more "traditional" formats of parent involvement within high schools including organizing post-prom activities, athletic booster club participation, and concession stand help. However, not all respondents offered successful strategies. Two administrators offered insights into their own personal belief systems. "Parents care about their students' education regardless of SES. The difference comes from their ability to navigate the system. The more education a parent has, the more likely they are able to navigate the system." Another administrator felt that "the biggest obstacle to parent involvement is parents want to run the school and interfere with the process….They are only concerned with their child and their child's best friends."

Discussion

Administrators in South Dakota's high schools do not display strong tendencies either for or against parent involvement, as only 6 of the 32 questions garnered responses that indicated agreement or strong agreement. The average mean responses for the remaining questions were below 3.0 on a four-point Likert scale. This suggests that, as a group, South Dakota principals do not overwhelmingly support or reject the concept of parent involvement. The issues with the strongest level of support were related to collaboration, while little support was given for parental participation in the teacher hiring process.

Earlier research determined that principals in elementary schools believe strongly in parental involvement and are more likely to accept responsibility for implementing and providing structured involvement opportunities (Brittle, 1994). Research done in middle schools (Lacey, 1999) indicated that middle-level principals are less likely to be strong advocates of parental involvement, and Peiffer (2003) found that high school principals in Michigan did not demonstrate a strong overall belief in parental involvement. While South Dakota secondary principals failed to show definitive support for the concept, neither did they disregard the importance of parents in certain aspects of the educational process. Given that this study dealt with only South Dakota principals, we cannot generalize to a regional or larger population.

These results confirm that individual administrator's attitudes differ regarding the concept of parental involvement at the secondary level. Furthermore, the results suggest that while building-level administrators may view parental involvement as desirable, their actions may not support this belief. Unfortunately, few teacher and administrator preparatory programs offer specific coursework in nurturing parental involvement, and both new and seasoned principals are left to define and develop their own beliefs and practices. At the secondary level, too often these beliefs are based on the erroneous assumption that high school parents no longer wish to be active participants in their children's education.

Much of the responsibility for developing such involvement and partnership activities lies with the building principals, who in turn have a responsibility to lead their respective staff members in the development of programs that foster sustained involvement at the secondary level. "Through principal leadership, schools can develop strong programs of school, family, and community partnerships and create and sustain cultures of academic achievement and success" (Sanders & Sheldon, 2009, p. 24).

The current study confirms that communication between high schools and secondary-level students' parents necessitates further examination. Both

administrators and parents struggle to find acceptable avenues for parental involvement in a secondary school setting. While the roles for parental involvement in the elementary grade levels are more clearly defined and accepted by teachers and parents alike, it does not negate the importance of continued, ongoing involvement as the child progresses through school. The commonly defined roles of parent volunteers in the classrooms are acceptable avenues for elementary-level engagement. As a child enters middle school and later high school, the roles for parents must change, not be abolished or overlooked.

A primary task of adolescent development involves increasing independence from one's parents (Eccles & Harold, 1993), and finding appropriate roles for parents within a high school setting is a challenging but not insurmountable task. While South Dakota secondary principals tend to agree that the primary responsibility for involving parents should not be placed on the shoulders of classroom teachers, they struggle with identifying appropriate involvement opportunities for high school parents. In fact, principals in South Dakota high schools are better able to define how they *do not* feel parents should be involved. With respect to collaboration, South Dakota secondary principals believe strongly and consistently that parental collaboration is important with respect to the impact it has on student behavior and grades. On the contrary, though, principals do not believe parental collaboration is necessary in regard to the hiring and evaluation of faculty. The principals also did not believe the primary responsibility for enhancing parental involvement resided with classroom teachers. It appears that principals want parents to help support and direct their teenagers, but are uncomfortable with parental involvement as it relates to some school decision-making roles. This creates a unique challenge for administrators to identify parental involvement roles that parents deem meaningful and principals deem acceptable.

A recurring theme of this study related to issues of communication between secondary schools and parents. The study found that the level of commitment afforded to communication between secondary parents and schools differed based on several variables including gender, administrators' educational attainment levels and professional titles, and school size. Generally, those administrators identifying themselves as a Principal responded more favorably to survey statements related to communication than did those who self-identified as Assistant Principals. One reason may be the nature of job responsibilities typically attributed to Assistant Principals which frequently involves issues related to truancy or discipline. Such parental communications often are not positive interactions. Survey results also revealed that South Dakota principals in smaller schools may have more time and energy to support parental involvement efforts, while those at larger schools frequently have both more students

and staff to supervise, possibly resulting in less time available to dedicate toward parental involvement efforts.

While surveyed principals stressed using multiple methods of communication, common forms used at the secondary level tend to be institutional in nature, such as newsletters, websites, recorded phone messages, and parent portals accessed via the Internet. While this type of one-way communication is successful in disseminating information, it often fails to bring about the active engagement that many principals and parents desire. If the dependence on one-way forms of communication decreases, opportunities for administrators to initiate personal interactions will be enhanced. While it may be easier, faster, and more efficient to communicate with high school parents via a one-way communication mode, many field researchers have found two-way communication is a critical component of effective parental engagement.

As noted by South Dakota principals in response to the qualitative question, attendance at parent–teacher conferences significantly increases when personal invitations are extended to parents and parents recognize that their presence is both desired and expected. It is not sufficient for administrators and teachers to say they maintain an open door policy for parents; instead, invitations should be offered to specific events. Efforts should be made to utilize both high-tech and low-tech solutions for sharing information in an attempt to meet the diverse needs of parents (Epstein, 2007).

Secondary-level administrators should strive to create meaningful roles for parents within high schools, thereby increasing collaborative educational efforts between secondary schools and adolescent parents. Sanders and Sheldon (2009) suggest that building principals can play a vital role in this process by building trusting relationships, engaging in two-way communication, encouraging meaningful volunteerism opportunities for parents, and supporting a team approach to parent partnerships in their schools. Indeed, Ferguson and Rodriguez (2007) suggested that the "crux of family–school involvement at the middle and high school level is determining the kinds of adult interactions that not only allow teenagers to have autonomy and respect, but also meet the needs of families and schools" (p. 18).

Finally, we must reexamine the belief that the parents of secondary-level students are not as interested in their child's education simply because teenagers seek independence and thus create a natural distance from their parents. The challenges associated with implementing effective parent involvement programs at the secondary level may be significant; however, it is ultimately the administrator's responsibility to negotiate the obstacles to the effective implementation of parental involvement programs. Since building-level principals often set the tone for school climate and can either encourage or discourage school practices

through their words and actions, it is important to examine secondary school principals' attitudes as they relate to the issue of parent involvement. As Fege (2000) suggested, "School leaders can no longer view parents as appendages to schooling or meddlers in their work. They can no longer ignore parents or treat them with disdain" (p. 39). Moving parental involvement from rhetoric to practice (Atha, 1998) requires a significant commitment by secondary level principals and ultimately ensures that high school students are afforded maximum opportunities for both academic and developmental success.

Directions for Further Research

Based on the review of literature and study conclusions, several recommendations for further research emerged. An analysis of both administrator preparation programs and undergraduate teacher education programs should be conducted to determine the extent of course content that is related to nurturing parental involvement, especially at the middle and high school level. Because identifying and implementing developmentally appropriate and acceptable strategies is increasingly difficult as a child progresses through school, attention needs to be given to this topic in administrative preparation programs, especially those at the secondary level.

Parent perceptions of school communication should be further examined. Specifically, issues related to home–school communications and invitations for involvement should be qualitatively assessed. Furthermore, research regarding the specific roles that both parents and students are comfortable with would help define how administrators can implement socially and developmentally acceptable parental involvement programs within their schools.

Finally, given the special challenges associated with parent involvement at the secondary level and apparent lack of preparation for this role in graduate programs, new principals would benefit from ready access to successful strategies in other schools. Such information would lessen some of the burden from trial and error in new programs and allow new secondary administrators to implement proven strategies that are age-appropriate within their buildings, thereby increasing the chance for effectiveness.

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